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ABSTRACT

An informal and minimally organized international early childhood movement has slowly arisen from a combination of intellectual and social antecedents. Several reasons for the emergence of this movement can be cited: recognition of the crucial nature of the early years of life for children's social development and cognitive development; changes in family structure and family characteristics; increasing commitment to children's rights; and the recognition that other needed intervention services, such as those for clinically malnourished children, are less valuable without an educational or developmental component. Major currents of action in the area of early childhood education which represent current global trends include: (1) merger between early education and day care; (2) recognition that early education extends to include infancy; (3) concern with curriculum development; (4) recognition that the curriculum imparts values as well as skills; (5) the development of programs for young children with disabilities; (6) concern for developmental continuity between early childhood and subsequent education; (7) increasing parent involvement; (8) finding ways to provide support services to improve family life; (9) new appreciation of the importance of program evaluation; and (10) concern with increasing public perception of the positive value of early childhood education. (RH)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD--GLOBAL ISSUES, GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Bettye M. Caldwell

Although we still have a long way to go before achieving the "One World" about which our philosophers and statesman have dreamed for many years, there are indeed a few areas of human endeavor in which we come closer to achieving this orientation than we do in others. The field of early childhood is one of these. In fact, there is no question but that there is something of an international movement--albeit informal and minimally organized--that could be called the International Early Childhood Movement. I am proud to be part of that movement, and I am sure that the same is true for each of you.

This movement has not arisen de novo; rather it has arisen slowly from a combination of intellectual and social antecedents. Actually it would be difficult if not impossible to conclude whether the intellectual or the social factors were more powerful in the groundswell of activity that is occurring worldwide in the field of early childhood.

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At least several reasons can be cited for this movement:

(1) Recognition of the crucial nature of the early years of life. For the past twenty-five years there has been a steady accretion of new knowledge pointing to the tremendous importance of an adequate early environment for children if their social and intellectual potentials are to be realized. From 1961, with the publication of Hunt's monumental book, Intelligence and Experience, to the present time there has been a steady accretion of information about the either deleterious or facilitative impact

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of different patterns of environmental stimulation for children (Caldwell & Freyer, 1982). Although there have been periods of discouragement, as, for example following the publication of what has been called the Westinghouse Report of 1969, with this discouragement mostly associated with occasional irrational promises of what the field could accomplish, there has been a steady increment in the pool of data that could be pointed to to support the importance of early education for young children. In general the results have tended to show that the impact of participating in an enriched early childhood experience is greater for children being reared in circumstances considered less than optimal. As every country in the world, developed and developing, has its share of such children, this finding has served to align our field with other national movements whenever there is genuine concern with development.

(2) Changes in the family. Another major impetus for the development of the field of early childhood has been the fact that the family is changing rapidly. Although the specific nature of the change varies as a function of cultural setting, some type and degree of change appears to be occurring everywhere. The biggest changes in the Western world relate to the fairly rapid creation and dissolution of basic family structures. It is now estimated that at least one out of three children born today will spend at least part of his or her time during the childhood years in a one-parent family. Also large numbers of children can expect to spend significant amounts of time in reconstituted families--families in which one or both marriage partners enter the relationship with children from a previous union, with possibly still other children being born to that union. In some respects the biggest change in America relates to the large number of children being born into

and growing up in one-parent families. As most of these families are women, and as women in whatever occupational line tend not to earn as much money as men in the same line of work, this means that many of these children will grow up in conditions of economic constraints. Other significant family changes relate less to structure than function. For example, in the United States at present the mother with children under six who remains in the home as a full time caregiver is in the minority rather than in the majority as tended to be the case in the past. The fact that large numbers of women with young children now either must work outside the home to enable the family to have enough income to live on or else choose to do so in and of itself has given major impetus to the development of more and hopefully better early childhood programs.

(3) Increasing commitment to the rights of children. What has sometimes been called the "children's rights movement" has had a good deal of attention in recent years. The activities associated with the International Year of the Child, with the re-issuing of the UNICEF statement regarding the rights of children, has generated a good deal of thought around the world about whether children do indeed have these basic rights. One of these was "the right to free education." If indeed a child cannot be educated to the limits of his or her potential without having had a nurturant and creative set of early childhood experiences, then there is no way that that right can be achieved for children without the availability of early childhood educational services. But, of course, the most meaningful right of all children is to be

brought up by loving and nurturant and competent parents, and within the past decade the field of early childhood has provided a great deal of support to parents who conscientiously want to develop the skills that they need to accompany their feelings and their desires to do the best they possibly can for their children.

(4) The recognition that other needed services will be less valuable without an educational component. Another major impetus for the international early childhood movement has come from attempts to develop other kinds of meaningful intervention programs. An excellent example can be found in the field of malnutrition and the social and intellectual development of children. For years intervention projects concerned with improving the lot of the child who had experienced severe and serious clinical malnutrition operated from a point of view which implied that if the children were given extra food, that was all that was necessary. There is, however, a new recognition that malnourishment tends to be imbedded in a social context characterized by many other environmental inadequacies from the standpoint of the child's development. Thus most creative programs that are now concerned with teaching mothers of young infants how to prepare food that will be nutritionally valuable are also concerned with teaching the mothers how to stimulate their infants in such a way as to pace language and intellectual development as well as physical and motor development. In the United States at the present time, there is a general recognition that all programs developed for infants who are considered at risk must have some sort of educational or developmental component to the intervention that is provided.

All of these factors add up to the necessity of concern for young children on the part of all countries of the world, to the necessity of trying to articulate national goals for children if national goals for development are considered important. I should like to say parenthetically that sometimes this concern is less visible in the large developed nations than it is in many of the developing countries.

GLOBAL ISSUES

I shall try to highlight some of the major currents of action in the area of early childhood which represent global trends today as I perceive them. Although the manifestations of these trends will have distinctly national and local characteristics, they can nonetheless be perceived to some degree wherever one goes.

(1) Merger between early education and day care. This is indeed an important trend in that it has given status to the field of day care and it has given relevance and practicality to the field of early childhood education. If I had described it as a marriage instead of a merger, I might have used an American expression and characterized it as a "shotgun marriage." Certainly if indeed it is a marriage, it is not clear whether it is a linking of two dynasties or a result of skillful matchmaking, with each side of the family expecting the other to have money and status!

But indeed the marriage has occurred and is actually long overdue. It has been necessitated by the same family and economic changes cited above. Without this coming together of the two major aspects of the field of early child development, the importance of early childhood within the field of education as a whole would have been diminished. This merger has helped achieve

many objectives that have been formulated for early childhood programs, chief among which is that the merger has removed the restrictions imposed by the socioeconomic criteria which in many parts of the world defined the population likely to be reached by either of these programs individually. That is, traditionally early childhood has been the province of the middle class and the well-to-do, whereas day care has been a service available to the poor and needy. Now we find affluent children whose mothers are employed outside the home in day care, and we find creative early childhood programs being designed to meet the experiential needs of poor children. This is indeed a wholesome trend.

(2) Recognition that the "early" in early education includes infancy. It may seem paradoxical to have to call attention to this fact, and yet it does indeed represent a fairly recent trend. Two decades ago when I began my work in early childhood as an operator of an infant program of service and research, the idea of any sort of educational program for infants was objectionable to many people. At that time early childhood education as defined as covering the years 3 to 8. It was interesting tht this definition prevailed in spite of the fact that the leading theorists of that time--people like Bloom, Hunt, and Bruner--were stressing the critical nature of the first three years of life. Undoubtedly one of the most important social programs ever developed in America is Head Start. The so-called position paper which lead to the formation of Head Start in early 1965 actually stressed the importance of the first three years of life from the standpoint of being able to mobilize environmental support for child development. It is perhaps typical of what happens when we try to

implement a concept that Head Start, once operationalized, was developed for children who were five and six years old. In spite of this, gradually and steadily there has been a sharp increase in the number of research and service programs concerned with infancy. Furthermore, there has been a great deal of research in this area in recent years (see Caldwell & Freyer, 1982) to demonstrate that having children togther in young groups does not impair their attachment to their parents, as was once feared, and does not, if adequate health safeguards are maintained, expose them to unnecessary risk of infection. In addition, clear cognitive gains can be seen for children from under-stimulating early environments as a consequence of participation in such programs. It has also been fascinating to observe the general public acceptance of this idea over the last several years. Formerly in America most public and private centers tended to have most applications oriented to the three, four and five year age range. Now most requests for service are for infants, many of whom remain in programs for several years.

(3) Concern with curriculum. This, to me is one of the healthiest intellectual trends detectable in the field during the past two decades. Again to refer to my own personal history in the field, when I became active twenty years ago it was not acceptable to talk about the curriculum; rather we referred to the "daily program." Now there is a great deal of intellectual ferment and excitement surrounding the area of curriculum development and more open-mindedness than formerly characterized the field. Ways to plan the daily program so that experiences have the maximum impact on the children and allow the assimilation of knowledge via creative and innovative approaches characterize the current emphasis on curriculum.

(4) Recognition that the curriculum imparts values as well as skills. This trend is so important that to mention it may even sound naive, and yet frequently we have a way of acting as though we are not imparting significant national attitudes and values--and hopefully international attitudes and values--in our programs. Also I think we see more interest today in open discussion and concern about what those values are and should be. In the United States one of the major manifestations of this is concerned with developing multi-ethnic programs for young children, of finding ways to communicate the importance of people from all ethnic and cultural groups and to make certain young children, during their period of acceptance of life and one another, have exposure to representatives of different groups. But this trend also is manifested in finding ways of communicating to children important social values that are considered important for the culture.

There are people who feel that many early childhood programs do not do enough along these lines. Certainly there is some concern in the United States about that by persons who feel that early childhood, along with other forms of education, are exclusively humanistic and subtly undermine parental religious beliefs. One tends to find this recognition of the importance of values most clearly and most intensified either in revolutionary societies or in groups with deeply held religious beliefs.

(5) Developing programs for young handicapped children. This is indeed a most important issue in many parts of the world. The modus operandi of these programs varies in different countries. In the United States, for example, there is general endorsement of the policy of mainstreaming handicapped children into programs for non-handicapped children. And yet in early childhood we do not

actually see as much of this as one might anticipate. I have found it interesting over the past ten years to note that teachers of elementary children appear to be more accepting of the idea of mainstreaming than many teachers of very young children. "We are not trained to handle them," is the comment one often hears. At any rate, regardless of whether the programs are operated somewhat autonomously or whether there is a mechanism for blending the handicapped children into programs for non-handicapped, this is indeed an important trend.

(6) Concern for continuity between early childhood and subsequent education. To me this is one of the most important issues facing us. Almost throughout its history the field of early childhood has existed somewhat separately from the mainstream of education. In spite of the fact that many of the world's greatest educational thinkers--people like Comenius, Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, and Dewey--had much to say about the importance of the early years, the field somehow lacked a certain legitimacy in the minds of educational planners. It was only with the intellectual ferment of the early sixties, sparked by brilliant treatises from some of the leaders of education and psychology, that the field of early childhood began to gain status within the field of education itself and led people to begin to think about smoother transitions from these early programs into subsequent programs. Head Start was designed to facilitate the functioning of socially disadvantaged children in the regular public school, but in the way that Head Start has devloped in America there is actually very little communication between the

operators of the Head Start proram and those of the subsequent elementry schools which the children will attend. Finding effective administrative and conceptual ways to facilitate this continuity and the actual transition is an important issue within the field.

(7) Increasing parent involvement. Parent involvement has always been a major part of early childhood programs. In many parts of the world the movement really got its start through parent cooperatives; if the school had some kind of program or party or guest speaker, the staff could count on almost 100% attendance from the parents. But, alas, times have changed. As pointed out earlier, the number of mothers now available to participate with school personnel during the day in any kind of parent program is small indeed. Times have changed, and the old patterns of parent involvement simply do not work. It is a time in which we must be very creative and try to develop new ways that will involve parents with us in activities for their children. Many new programs have developed ways of having "contacts on the run." This is not a bad description of the sort of thinking that we have to do these days in order to find ways to involve parents in our program.

(8) Finding ways to support families. Although this is related to the previous point, I actually use it in a slightly different way. The field of early childhood is a family support service just as it is a service directly for children. Although not everyone likes this concept, I have been suggesting that our early childhood-day care programs are the modern equivalent of the extended family. I find it fascinating that in many countries the word "auntie" is used as a designation for the child care worker.

Although there are obviously many factor behind the slow evolution of a linguistic custom, in this particular case I think it does indeed tell us that many people view the worker as someone not unlike an aunt (or uncle) of the children. But in early childhood programs we have to find ways to support all families--the young family and the one-parent family in particular need our support. And, I must say, that the field has some of its most ardent supporters in these modern variants on the traditional family.

(9) New appreciation of evaluation. This is a most important issue about which we have not made a great deal of progress. Many people still do not realize that, just as is true for all aspects of education, we must be willing to put our programs to the scrutiny of research and evaluation efforts in order that we may be able to declare with certainty the kinds of effects associated with participation in early childhood programs. Recently in the United States (Lazar & Darlington, 1982) a major data analysis has been conducted of long-term data from several projects conducted during the early sixties. Although in general the findings from this long-term evaluation are not spectacular or dramatic, they are definitely positive and encouraging. They have had more impact in convincing people of the importance of early childhood educational programs than anything that has happened over the past twenty years. And, had not careful attempts been made to document the status of the children at the beginning of the program, to document what actually transpired in whatever interventon program they participated in, and then to document various kinds of outcomes, these programs would not have been able to impact the educational and political world as they have. It is to be hoped that from now on there will be no resistance to some kind of meaningful evaluation on the part of persons in early childhood.

(10) Concern with increasing public awareness of the value of early childhood. The field of early childhood still has a bad image. In the minds of many people we are still "babysitting" services, to use the most uncomplimentary term that is widely used in the United States. There are those who refer to the field as somehow weakening families, even though our services are often the only support services available to families in jeopardy. There is a widespread attitude that no particular training is necessary for personnel who will work in early childhood--"Why, anybody can do that," appears to be the attitude. And such a foolish attitude indeed, for most people literally could not make it through a single day! Everyone in the field must accept the challenge to try and find ways to improve the image of our field and to increase the recognition on the part of the general public of the tremendous importance for the welfare of children and the total society of the type of early intervention program available in any country.

SUMMARY

It is an exciting time in early childhood at home and abroad. I have mentioned ten global issues, each of which represents a challenge to workers in the field. Briefly these are: a merger between early education and day care, which, among other things, enables formerly unreached children to receive much needed stimulation and support; widespread recognition of the importance of infancy; greater openness to curriculum development and change; concern for developmental continuity; innovative and intensified efforts to involve parents; attempts to help young and often

unprepared parents; a new openness to evaluation; and a determination to raise the consciousness of the general public about the value of our services. I urge all of us to work together to help people throughout the world to recognize the societal implications of early childhood and express my hope that we will indeed work together at this task in the years ahead.

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